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Special Education Professional Standards: How Important Are They in the Context of Teacher Performance Evaluation?

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Abstract

Teacher performance evaluation represents a high stakes issue as evidenced by its pivotal emphasis in national and local education reform initiatives and federal policy levers. National, state, and local education leaders continue to experience unprecedented pressure to adopt standardized benchmarks to reflect and link student achievement data to formal teacher performance evaluations. No teacher performance evaluation measures have been developed for use with special education teachers or the settings in which they teach. Dedicated focus is needed to ensure that adopted evaluation measures are sensitive to the specific expertise reflected in the practices of specialty teachers and valid for use. This study explored whether special education stakeholders perceived skills subsumed within nationally endorsed professional special education standards to be important for special education teachers' effectiveness. Findings are presented in terms of next steps to inform the development of a meaningful measure of special education teacher professional performance and implications for future research.

Key words: educational reform, professional standards, special education teacher effectiveness, special education teacher evaluation

Special Education Professional Standards: How Important Are They in the Context of Teacher Performance Evaluation?

Economists and others vested in the public interest have long argued that the nation's economic and social stability depends on a well educated workforce and citizenry (Hess & Kelly, 2011; Jerald, 2008; Shiplett, Russell, Khadamien, & Gant, 2010). Fueled in part by findings that US students' academic performance has consistently fallen below that of their international peers, education reform initiatives have increasingly emphasized the need to improve the quality of public education (Hess & Kelly, 2011; Jerald, 2008). They have also more systematically focused on the importance of ensuring that the nation's youth will compete successfully in the complex global markets that characterize the 21st Century (Hinchey, 2010; Jerald, 2008; United States Department of Education [USDOE], 2008).

National policy initiatives such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 (USDOE, 1965) and its most recent reauthorization as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (USDOE, 2002) were intended, in part, to ensure these goals. These mandates included various incentives for states to improve high school students' school and career readiness, schools' capacities to meet students' academic needs, and systems to increase teachers' overall competence and effectiveness. NCLB specifically established criterion student achievement and performance targets in addition to minimum professional teacher credential criteria (i.e., highly qualified) (Amerin-Beardsley, 2009; Brownell, Sindelar, Kiely, & Danielson, 2010; McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008; Thompson, Lazurus, Clapper, & Thurlow, 2006).

While both the ESEA and NCLB incorporated funding and other supports to encourage states' adoption of recommended actions, neither included specific mechanisms to compel states' compliance. This added layer of federal oversight was added through the Obama administration's

landmark Race to the Top (RTTT) program (USDOE 2009a). To receive critical federal funding, RTTT required states' endorsement of and formal commitment to ensure mechanisms to capture and track student achievement, and to use these data to inform annual teacher performance evaluations (Hess & Kelly, 2011; Partee, 2012; RTTT Executive Summary, USDOE 2009b).

As a result of these policy shifts and heightened public concerns, the current context of public education represents unprecedented challenges and opportunities at all levels of education, including teacher performance evaluation. Accrued empirical evidence demonstrates that teachers' impacts represent the largest in school contribution to student outcomes (Gordon, Kane, & Staiger, 2006; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005) and that students taught by effective teachers demonstrated higher academic achievement than students taught by less effective teachers (Feng & Sass, 2010; Kane, Rockoff, & Staiger, 2006). Findings have also demonstrated that traditional teacher performance evaluation systems failed to distinguish high- versus low-performing teachers (Gallagher, Rabinowitz, & Yeagley, 2011; Heneman, Milanowski, Kimball, Odden, 2006; Weisberg, Sexton, Mulhern, & Keeling, 2009).

As state and federal education leaders move forward to increase schools' accountability for improved student outcomes, they must reconcile a number of urgent pragmatic dilemmas to ensure fair and reasonable teacher performance evaluation (Baker et al., 2010; Braun, 2005; Rockoff & Speroni, 2010; Prince et al., 2009). One critical challenge is that the field continues to be constrained by insufficient clarity and consensus over how best to define and measure what it means to be an effective teacher despite federal mandates for the development of statewide teacher performance evaluation systems (Campbell, Kyriakides, Muijs, & Robinson, 2003; Fenstermacher & Richardson, 2005; Goe, 2007; Goe, Bell, & Little, 2008; Strong, Gargani, & Hacifazlioğlu, 2011). As a consequence, teachers – and especially special educators – are at risk for unfair and/or

inaccurate performance evaluation and related employment decisions (Baker et al., 2010; Goe, 2007).

There is no doubt that teachers regularly engage in multiple, complex activities (Campbell et al., 2003; Goe et al., 2008), yet most of these are only marginally represented in static, quantitative, or objective dimensions. To ensure equity, it is critical that the measures used to evaluate teachers' performance reliably disentangle and capture teachers' varied functions and roles. These measures must also meaningfully embody the professional skills and practices that are most directly related to student learning, growth, and achievement (Baker, et al., 2010; Braun, 2005; Gallagher et al., 2011; Partee, 2012; Rockoff & Speroni, 2010). These requirements represent challenges for all teachers, but especially special educators (Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004; Blanton, Sindelar, & Correa, 2006; Brownell, Ross, Colón, & McCallum, 2005; Council for Exceptional Children [CEC], 2012; Holdheide, Goe, Croft, & Reschly, 2010).

By role and function, special education teachers are responsible for the delivery of specialized pedagogies and student supports (Billingsley et al., 2004; Blanton et al., 2006; CEC, 2009). At minimum, special educators routinely work with a wide array of school colleagues, often in multiple school and classroom settings, and as members of varied team configurations. As well, they must manage large, diverse student caseloads which in turn requires them to design, implement, monitor, and manage many individualized education plans (IEPs) (Billingsley et al., 2004; Brownell, Sindelar, Kiely, & Danielson, 2010; CEC, 2009, 2012; Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001; Jones & Brownell, 2014; Watson, Thorn, Ponisciak, & Boehm, 2011). Because students' learning needs vary substantially, these teachers engage in practices that may not be uniform across students or classrooms, thus their performance may be misunderstood or even difficult for untrained evaluators to observe and assess (Baker et al., 2010; Buckley &

Marion, 2011; CEC, 2012; Gallagher et al., 2011; Graham, Milanowski, & Miller, 2012; Holdheide, Browder, Warren, Buzick, & Jones, 2012; Jones & Brownell, 2014; Sledge & Pazez, 2013; Steele, Hamilton, & Stecher, 2010; Toch, 2008).

Districts across the nation are increasingly developing and relying on multiple measures to streamline and inform teacher performance evaluation systems. To date, no teacher performance measure has been explicitly developed for use with special education teachers (CEC, 2012; Jones & Brownell, 2014; Semmelroth & Johnson, 2014). Instead, special educators' performance is routinely evaluated with measures that were developed and normed for use in general education settings, not special education contexts. These measures may be insensitive to the range and breadth of expertise expected of them (Blanton et al., 2006; CEC, 2009, 2012; Holdheide et al., 2012; Semmelroth & Johnson, 2014; Steele et al., 2010).

There is a dearth of empirical research to inform special education teacher performance evaluation, and more fundamentally, establish clarity regarding the professional skills that are critical for special educators' effectiveness (Brownell et al., 2005; Blanton et al., 2006; Holdheide et al., 2012; Sindelar, Brownell, & Billingsley, 2010; Spooner, Algozzine, Wood, & Hicks, 2010). This prevails despite the availability of the widely accepted special education teacher professional standards that were promulgated by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), the premiere professional special education organization both in the US and globally (Blanton et al., 2006; CEC, 2009). These standards were developed as the result of the work of multiple special education researchers and practitioners; they are subjected to periodic review, revision, and consensus validation and are used by hundreds of special education teacher preparation programs to inform course and program focus (CEC, 2009; Mamlin, 2012). As such, CEC's standards represented an

untapped resource to inform special education teacher performance evaluation (Blanton et al., 2006; CEC, 2012; Holdheide et al., 2012).

The current study was situated in response to the urgent need for empirical research to inform efforts focused on special education teacher effectiveness and evaluation, in particular, the need for measures that are sensitive to special education teachers' unique professional expertise (Baker et al., 2010; Blanton et al., 2006; CEC, 2012; Holdheide et al., 2012; Spooner et al., 2010). To that end, three distinct special education stakeholder groups were asked to rate the importance of the professional skills included in the CEC's Initial Common Core (ICC) Standards (CEC, 2009). The skills of focus in this study were taken from the CEC's 2009 "Content" Standards not the 2013 "Preparation Standards" (CEC, 2013). These new standards reflected consolidation of skills within fewer thematic domains but in the majority both sets of standards included similar skills.

This investigation was informed by the following research questions:

(1) Do special education teachers, school administrators, and special education teacher educators perceive the professional special education skills subsumed within the CEC's national standards to be important for special education teacher effectiveness?

(2) Do any skills appear to be more or less important for special education teacher effectiveness?

(3) Do patterns of importance ratings differ in relation to stakeholders' distinct professional roles?

Method

Participants

For the purpose of this study, special education stakeholder groups were limited to full time state certified special education classroom teachers, credentialed school administrators, and special education teacher educators employed in accredited special education teacher preparation programs. Participants worked in a large, densely populated northeastern region of the United States. This area included approximately 5,000 registered public and non-public P-12 schools, roughly 3 million students (kindergarten through 12th grade), and approximately 453,000 students who received special education supports (<http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/elsi/>). The region also included approximately 30 nationally accredited special education teacher preparation programs.

A total of 295 individuals responded to the study's invitation and completed at least some portion of the online survey instrument. Of these, 238 participants' responses were included for analysis. This reflects the exclusion of 57 participants' surveys because they were only partially completed, or because respondents indicated that they did not meet the study's inclusion criteria as listed on recruitment and online study materials. The final sample was comprised of 127 special education teachers; 58 school administrators; and 53 special education teacher educators.

Consistent with national demographic patterns reported about education professionals, the majority of study participants were female (79% women, 21% men), and they self identified as White, non-Hispanic (85%). Special education teachers comprised just over half of the sample (53%), while school administrators and special education teacher educators were roughly evenly distributed within the total sample (24% and 22%, respectively). Last, special education teacher participants were, in the majority, younger than participants in the other two stakeholder groups. Participants' demographic characteristics by stakeholder group are summarized in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 about here.]

Overall, participants were experienced, well educated, and professionally credentialed. That is, special education teachers had, on average, 12 years experience in the field; participants in the other two stakeholder groups had 24 years experience. In addition, 76% of the sample had obtained at least one master's degree while 22% had earned doctorate degrees. The majority of special education teachers were certified as professional/permanent teachers (80%), while most school administrators (79%) held their state's most advanced school leader credential. Most of the special education teacher educators (71%) were in tenure track faculty positions (34% were Assistant Professors, 26% were Associate Professors, and 11% were Full Professors). The remaining teacher educators held clinical or other positions such as field coordinators (28%).

Survey Instrument

The online survey instrument included a brief description of the study's focus, inclusion and exclusion criteria, ways to contact the researcher, and the instrument's subsections. The first section included closed ended questions to capture participants' professional training, credentials, roles, and experience. As appropriate, wording relative to specific role, license, or other credential information was tailored to match nuances such as license types.

A review of the literature was conducted to explore potential instruments appropriate for this investigation, in particular, measures to capture special education teachers' effectiveness along a continuum of professional skills. This review revealed that no such instrument existed and that CEC's standards represented the most comprehensive and widely endorsed set of special education professional skills available in the field (Blanton et al., 2006; CEC, 2009, 2012). As noted earlier, these skills were the result of multiple prior waves of review and consensus validation thus they were perceived to be both trustworthy and valid for the purposes of the study.

Subsequent to securing permission from the CEC to use their work product in the context of this study (R. Mainzer, August 23, 2012, personal communication) the survey instrument's second section was formatted as a 7-point Likert-type scale. All items in this section were directly tied to each of the 73 skills subsumed within the CEC's ICC Standards (CEC, 2009). Because the study was focused on identifying skills perceived to be important for special educators' effectiveness, only *skill* statements not additional *knowledge* statements were retained from the ICC Standards. In addition, two of the ICC domains did not include specific skill statements (i.e., *development and characteristics of learners* and *individual learning differences*); thus they were not represented in this study.

Consistent with how the skills were developed and validated by the CEC, the survey instrument grouped skills within the thematic domains developed by CEC. Each subsection of the survey (i.e., groups of skills by thematic domain) was preceded by the prompt, "Please rate how important the (domain category name) skill(s) listed below is/are for a special education teacher's professional success and effectiveness." Perceived importance was anchored at the low end (i.e., a rating of 1) by the descriptor "Not at all Important," at the high end (i.e., a rating of 7) by the descriptor "Extremely Important," and at the midpoint (i.e., a rating of 4) by the descriptor, "Neutral Importance."

Skill statements' original wording was retained except in two instances to enhance flow. For example, the original wording for the second skill statement within the *instructional design* domain read: "Teach individuals to use self-assessment, problem solving, and other cognitive strategies to meet their needs." This item was marginally modified to read: "Teaches individuals to use self assessment, problem solving, and other cognitive strategies to meet their own needs." Table 2 includes examples of the skill statements that participants reviewed and rated (the entire

set of skills can be viewed at <http://www.cec.sped.org/Standards/Special-Educator-Professional-Preparation/Old-CEC-Content-Standards>).

[Insert Table 2 about here.]

Internal reliability of skill scales. The skills selected for inclusion in this study reflected wide national and international acceptance and were subjected to repeated consensus validation strategies, not explicit empirical validation. To verify that skill statements as grouped were well related, domains' internal reliability was calculated. This was done for seven of the eight domains as these were comprised of more than one skill. Since the domain *foundations* included only one skill statement, internal reliability was not calculated.

Overall, the skill domains appeared to be comprised of well related items. Five of the seven domains (*learning environment, instructional planning, assessment, ethics, and collaboration*) demonstrated strong internal reliability ($\alpha = .92$, $\alpha = .92$, $\alpha = .91$, $\alpha = .94$, $\alpha = .95$, respectively). The internal reliability for *instructional design* was found to be reliable ($\alpha = .79$), while the internal reliability for the *communication* domain was just below the level of significance ($\alpha = .67$).

Procedures

Dissemination. Potential participants were identified and electronically recruited after extensive data mining of publicly accessible online and print directories and websites (e.g., those maintained by state and county education offices, regional P-12 school districts, special education teacher preparation programs, national higher education accreditation organizations, and multiple professional education organizations). In addition to direct recruitment, participants were solicited through snowball sampling strategies. That is, all study materials included an explicit request for recipients to forward invitations on to other potential participants; study materials were sent to a

wide range of professional contacts along with the request that invitations be forwarded to their respective contacts. Last, participants were recruited on behalf of the researcher by the national office of the CEC. Specifically, CEC emailed study invitations to three randomly selected subsets of members in the targeted geographic region (i.e., members at large; members affiliated with higher education; and members affiliated with school administration). All study invitations included a cover letter explaining the focus of the study, inclusion and exclusion criteria, electronic links to the online survey instrument, the researcher's contact information, and as noted above, the request to forward study invitations to potential additional participants.

Data collection. Data collection began in October 2012, and continued through January 31, 2013 at which time all links to study instruments were closed. Throughout the data collection period, responses were completed anonymously and stored on SurveyMonkey™ (<http://www.surveymonkey.com>). Access to and completion of the online survey instrument was voluntary and anonymous, and did not require respondents to provide personally identifying information. Survey completion was self-directed and allowed participants to skip questions without penalty. In some instances, participants elected to contact the researcher to clarify inclusion criteria. No identifying data were retained once these interactions were concluded.

In addition to overall descriptive statistics, and building from skill domains' demonstrated internal reliability, skills' mean importance ratings were explored first through a within subjects Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), then pairwise two-tailed *t*-tests, and finally a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA).

Results

In advance of the study's main analyses, responses were examined for patterns. In the majority, participants rated all of the 73 skills as having relatively high importance. That is, no

skills were rated below 5.0 (“moderately important”), and the majority of skills’ means across all three groups fell solidly between 6.0 and 6.80, with 7.0 representing the absolute highest rating possible. Moreover, scores reflected very little variation for the skills or by group, as evidenced by the observation that ratings were within 1 to 1.5 standard deviations of skills’ highest ratings. The study’s main findings are presented below in relation to each research question.

Research Question One

The central question and context of this study was whether special education teachers, school administrators, and special education teacher educators perceived the skills subsumed within CEC’s national standards to be important for special education teachers’ professional effectiveness. Findings suggested that these skills are important. That is, the within subjects ANOVA model was significant subsequent to applying Greenhouse-Geisser and Huynh-Feldt adjustments ($p < .05$); $F(7, 1659) = 58.163$, $MSE = .281$, $p = .001$; Wilks’ $\lambda = .504$, and $\eta_p^2 = .197$.

Research Question Two

To explore whether specific skill domains appeared to be more or less important for special education teacher effectiveness, stakeholder groups’ mean importance ratings were compared graphically (*Figure 1*). Patterns of importance appeared to be similar across the eight skill domains, and each reflected similarly tight clusters. In addition, all groups’ mean importance ratings appeared to be lowest for the same skill domain (*foundations*).

[Insert *Figure 1* about here.]

Following this, the eight skill domains were compared across groups through a series of paired two-tailed *t*-tests. Specifically, each of the eight professional skill domain means was compared to the summed means of the remaining seven skills’ means. To adjust for the planned comparisons, a Bonferroni correction was applied and alpha was set at .006 (i.e., .05/8).

Five of the eight skill domains were significantly different in their relative importance, as compared to the remaining three skill domains. The skills for which differences were significant included: *foundations*, $t(237) = -9.14, p < .006$; *instructional design*, $t(237) = 4.92, p < .006$; *communication*, $t(237) = 6.93, p < .006$; *ethics*, $t(237) = 9.68, p < .006$; and *collaboration*, $t(237) = 5.57, p < .006$.

Research Question Three

A MANOVA was conducted to explore whether patterns of importance ratings differed across stakeholder groups. The produced model was significant for differences in groups' and skills' importance ratings $F(16, 456) = 2.172, p = .005$, Wilks' $\lambda = .863$, and $\eta_p^2 = .071$.

Specifically, differences were significant for five of the eight domains: *learning environment*, $F(2, 235) = 4.997, p = .007$, Wilks' $\lambda = .863$, and $\eta_p^2 = .041$; *instructional planning*, $F(2, 235) = 5.948, p = .003$, Wilks' $\lambda = .863$, and $\eta_p^2 = .048$; *assessment*, $F(2, 235) = 6.319, p = .002$, Wilks' $\lambda = .863$, and $\eta_p^2 = .051$; *ethics*, $F(2, 235) = 3.322, p = .038$, Wilks' $\lambda = .863$, and $\eta_p^2 = .027$; and *collaboration*, $F(2, 235) = 4.199, p = .016$, Wilks' $\lambda = .863$, and $\eta_p^2 = .035$.

Post-hoc comparisons were computed to determine if differences across stakeholder groups' importance ratings were significant. Tukey's HSD test was selected to offset the study's uneven group sizes. To control for increased chances of Type I errors, Scheffe's test was applied; to control for increased chances of Type II errors, Fisher's LSD test was included. These results are summarized in Table 3.

[Insert Table 3 about here.]

School administrators' importance ratings for four of the five domains were significantly higher in magnitude than special educators' and teacher educators' ratings. These domains included: *learning environment*, *instructional planning*, *assessment*, and *collaboration*. School

administrators also rated *ethics* as having higher importance than teacher educators, but not special education teachers. No statistically significant differences were observed for special education teachers' and special education teacher educators' importance ratings.

Discussion

This study was designed to contribute to the emerging body of research focused on special education teacher evaluation. Of central interest was whether the special education professional skills promulgated by the CEC, the premiere international and national special education professional organization, could be used to meaningfully inform the development of a special education teacher performance measure. To date, these skills have not been extensively explored for this purpose. Participants included full time, credentialed, and experienced professionals who were well positioned to inform the study (Campbell et al., 2003; Fenstermacher & Richardson, 2005; Goe et al., 2008; Heneman et al., 2006; Holdheide et al., 2012).

Findings demonstrated preliminary consensus among three distinct yet equally critical special education stakeholder groups about the importance of CEC's professional skills with respect to special education teacher effectiveness. This finding is quite timely and aligns with national recommendations for special education teachers' performance evaluation measures to be directly informed by trained professionals and to ensure that measures reflect these teachers' unique and specialized expertise and roles (Baker et al., 2010; Blanton et al., 2006; CEC, 2012; Holdheide et al., 2012; Sindelar et al., 2010).

Stakeholder groups' importance ratings appeared to follow similar patterns overall. In particular, the importance ratings of special education teachers and special education teacher educators did not differ significantly across skills. This finding, coupled with the study's overall findings, could be construed as affirmative evidence that CEC's ongoing and somewhat iterative

work has successfully created descriptions of skills that are perceived by multiple stakeholder groups as being critical for special educators' effectiveness (N. Mamlin, personal communication, January 8, 2013). Further, the observed preliminary consensus about these skills' importance indicates that the CEC's skills could be meaningfully applied toward the development of a special education teacher effectiveness measure. Last, and in relation to stakeholders' shared views, findings may indicate that special education teacher preparation practices have become more concretely aligned with the reported training and performance needs of practicing P-12 special education teachers (Blanton et al., 2006; Brownell et al., 2005; Mamlin, 2012).

Skills' Relative Importance Differs

As noted, participants in this study rated the skill domain represented as *foundations* as having the lowest relative importance, compared to the other CEC domains, for special education teacher effectiveness. This finding might make intuitive sense since this skill related to teachers' abilities to convey their personal philosophies about special education. However, this finding must be tempered because this domain differed from the other domains in at least two substantial ways. First, it only included one skill as compared to the other domains which had multiple skills. Second, this domain did not represent classroom or directly applicable expertise as was the case for the other included domains.

Participants rated four skill domains as being the most important overall for special education teacher effectiveness. These included: *instructional strategies*, *communication*, *ethics*, and *collaboration*. While it is not clear what specifically about these skills contributed to this finding, it is possible that these skills most explicitly represented what researchers have described as special educators' expanded role demands and performance expectations – and their critical

impact on special educators' effectiveness (Billingsley et al., 2004; Gersten et al., 2001; Holdheide et al., 2012; McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008).

Three of the remaining domains, while perceived overall as being important, were not differentially rated. That is, their relative importance did not differ significantly across groups. These domains were: *learning environment*, *instructional planning*, and *assessment*. In some ways this finding might suggest that the skills included in these domains represent equally important, fundamental, or core expertise that is routinely expected of all special educators. From this stance, perhaps these skills, as represented, simply failed to sufficiently distinguish skills that have become associated with high stakes special education role expectations (CEC, 2012; Holdheide et al., 2012; Semmelroth & Johnson, 2014; Watson et al., 2011). To some extent this interpretation might explain the lack of variability and ceiling effects observed across skills and groups. In addition, this interpretation conforms with recommendations to ensure that skills are worded in ways that reflect concrete and distinct areas of expertise (Blanton et al., 2006) as well as some of the considerations that led to the CEC's most recent revisions to the standards (J. Mittler, October 12, 2014, personal communication).

Skills' Importance Reflect Differences Across Stakeholders

It was quite noteworthy that for five of the eight skill domains, there were significant differences in how stakeholder groups rated skills' importance. In all cases where differences were statistically significant, school administrators rated skills at higher magnitudes than did either of the special education professionals. These differences were observed for *learning environment*, *instructional planning*, *assessment*, *ethics*, and *collaboration*. In an effort to explain this finding, ratings for all the individual skills that comprised the five domains were reviewed to verify

whether findings could be attributed to outliers. Upon review it was confirmed that observed differences did in fact reflect true patterns of importance across the skill domains.

In considering this finding, it is possible that school administrators, in contrast to special education professionals, relied on different understandings of the skills in part because of their less frequent, somewhat more indirect use of them (Eyal, Liberman, & Trope, 2008; Graham et al., 2012; Hill, Charalambos, & Kraft, 2012). That is, their ratings may have been subject to inflation. Alternatively, administrators might have perceived these skills as having higher importance specifically because their roles and responsibilities require more awareness of and sensitivity to high priority performance expectations associated with current school accountability policy mandates (Heneman et al., 2006; Graham et al., 2012; Toch, 2008). From this perspective, administrators might have considered the skills included in these five domains as having more direct impact on special educators' abilities to meet increased accountability and performance expectations, especially those related to increased inclusion of youngsters with disabilities in general education classroom settings, increased leadership, advocacy, and collaboration (Brownell et al., 2010; Holdheide et al., 2012).

Summary

Three special education stakeholder groups rated CEC's skills as important for special education teachers' effectiveness. Four domains emerged as most important overall, and one skill domain appeared to be least important overall. Participants' overall patterns of importance ratings were similar. School administrators rated five skill domains' importance as higher in magnitude than the ratings of special education teachers and special education teacher educators.

Limitations

A number of limitations must be considered in relation to these reported findings. First, it was not possible to verify that participants met the study's professional, regional, and other inclusion criteria as responses were collected anonymously. In light of this, it was impossible to calculate response rates or true percentages of completers. Further, the study included a relatively small, non-random set of participants and uneven groups. More broadly, it is possible that study participants were predisposed to favorably view CEC and/or its work products. Although multiple sequences and mechanisms were employed to recruit participants (i.e., direct emails, snowball sampling, networking at varied professional meetings and conferences), it is unclear whether the study sample was overly represented by individuals recruited through CEC's dissemination on behalf of the researcher.

Other limitations relate to how participants rated skills' importance in relation to teacher effectiveness. At no point was the term "teacher effectiveness" defined for participants. It remains unclear whether or how this confounded findings. Participants rated the importance of skills that were developed to inform special education teacher preparation practices; these items may have inadequately reflected the range of skills needed by special educators in P-12 school contexts. In addition, these skills were developed through consensus not empirical validation strategies. It remains unclear whether included items were sufficiently independent of each other or written in bias free, operationally clear language. It must also be noted that the skills explored in the present study have since been revised by the CEC. While many of the skills were retained in the 2014 revised standards (CEC, 2013), it is unclear whether or how these changes impact the current findings. Finally, this investigation included only three sets of special education stakeholders; numerous other perspectives are equally important, including those of parents and individuals with

disabilities. Taken together, these limitations serve to temper findings while concurrently pointing to a number of potential areas that warrant further study.

Directions for Future Research

First and foremost, effort is needed to confirm and expand on the present study's findings as doing so will directly contribute to the emerging research base focused on special education teacher effectiveness and performance evaluation. At minimum, some form of the present study should be repeated with a large, national sample to clarify whether critical special education stakeholders, including those charged with the evaluation of special education teachers, perceive CEC's professional special education skills to be important for special education teacher performance, effectiveness, and evaluation. This next layer of research should ensure that the skills of focus reflect recent revisions of CEC's standards (i.e., from *content* to *preparation* standards) (CEC, 2013). Additionally, research should explore whether specific professional skills emerge as most versus least important for special educators' effectiveness and/or whether skills' importance differs as a function of professional role. Finally, researchers should develop individual special education skills (items) that are written in bias free, objective terms; reflect independent rather than overlapping categories; and empirically validated.

Findings across these interrelated areas could enhance both preservice and inservice special education teacher training and professional development and maximize efforts to prepare and retain effective special educators in P-12 classroom settings (Billingsley et al., 2004; Blanton et al., 2006; Gersten et al., 2001; McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008; Sindelar et al., 2010; Spooner et al., 2010). As well, these lines of research would directly inform efforts focused on ensuring that special education teachers' professional performance is evaluated with fidelity and via measures

which are sensitive to their unique expertise (Baker et al., 2010; Holdheide et al., 2012; Jones & Brownell, 2014; Sledge & Pazey, 2013).

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Table 1

Participants' Demographic Descriptors

Characteristic	SE Teachers		SAs		SE TEs		Totals	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Female	107	84.3%	46	79.3%	36	67.9%	189	79.4%
Male	20	15.8%	12	20.7%	17	32.1%	49	20.6%
AmIn/AN	3	2.4%	2	3.5%	0	0.0%	5	2.1%
BlkNonHisp	9	7.1%	4	6.9%	2	3.8%	15	6.3%
Hispanic	4	3.2%	2	3.5%	2	3.8%	8	3.4%
Asian/PacIsld	4	3.2%	0	0.0%	3	5.7%	7	2.9%
WhiNonHisp	105	82.7%	50	86.2%	46	86.8%	201	84.5%
Other	2	1.6%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	2	.8%
25-40 yrs old	68	53.5%	10	17.2%	11	20.8%	89	37.4%
41-55 yrs old	43	33.9%	26	44.8%	19	35.8%	88	37.0%
56-70 yrs old	16	12.6%	22	38.0%	22	41.5%	60	25.2%
70+ yrs old	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	1.9%	1	0.4%

Note. SE = special education; SAs = school administrators; SE TEs = special education teacher educators; AmIn = American Indian; AN = Alaskan Native; BlkNonHisp = Black, non-Hispanic; PacIsld = Pacific Islander; WhiNonHisp = White, non-Hispanic; yrs = years.

Table 2

Sample ICC Skill Statements

 Individual Skill Statements by Domains

Foundations

Is able to articulate personal philosophy of special education.

Instructional Design

Selects, adapts, and uses instructional strategies and materials that match characteristics of students with exceptional learning needs.

Uses strategies to facilitate maintenance and generalization of students' skills across learning environments.

Learning Environment

Uses performance data and information from all stakeholders to make or suggest modifications in students' learning environments.

Mediates controversial intercultural issues among students within the learning environment in ways that enhance any culture, group, or person.

Communication

Uses strategies to support and enhance communication skills of students.

Uses communication strategies and resources to facilitate understanding of subject matter for students whose primary language is not the dominant language of P-12 school settings.

Instructional Planning

Identifies and prioritizes areas of the general curriculum and accommodations for P-12 students with exceptional learning needs (hereafter, students).

Involves students and their families in setting instructional goals and monitoring progress.

Assessment

Is able to administer nonbiased formal and informal assessments.

Uses assessment information in making eligibility, program, and placement decisions for students' needs, including those from culturally and/or linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Ethics

Upholds high standards of competence and integrity, and exercises sound judgment in the practice of the profession.

Demonstrates sensitivity for the culture, language, religion, gender, disability, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation of students.

Collaboration

Collaborates with school personnel and community members to integrate students into varied community and other settings.

Observes, evaluates, and provides meaningful feedback to paraeducators to enhance students' outcomes.

Note. Excerpted from CEC, 2009; used with permission.

Table 3

Differences in Perceived Importance of Special Education Professional Skills

Skill Domain	Paired [#] Importance Ratings ^{a,b,c}	Group 1		Group 2	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Learning Environment	SA-SE ^c	6.59	.41	6.40	.55
	SA-TE ^{abc}	6.59	.41	6.26	.68
Instructional Planning	SA-SE ^{abc}	6.55	.45	6.23	.62
	SA-TE ^c	6.55	.45	6.29	.66
Assessment	SA-SE ^{abc}	6.57	.41	6.23	.70
	SA-TE ^{abc}	6.57	.41	6.21	.72
Ethics	SA-TE ^{abc}	6.72	.38	6.45	.81
Collaboration	SA-SE ^c	6.69	.39	6.47	.56
	SA-TE ^{abc}	6.69	.39	6.36	.92

Note. Bonferroni correction applied, $p = .05$; SA = school administrators; SE = special education teachers; TE = special education teacher educators; [#] = group in first position rated importance higher; ^a = Tukey HSD; ^b = Scheffe; ^c = Fisher's LSD.

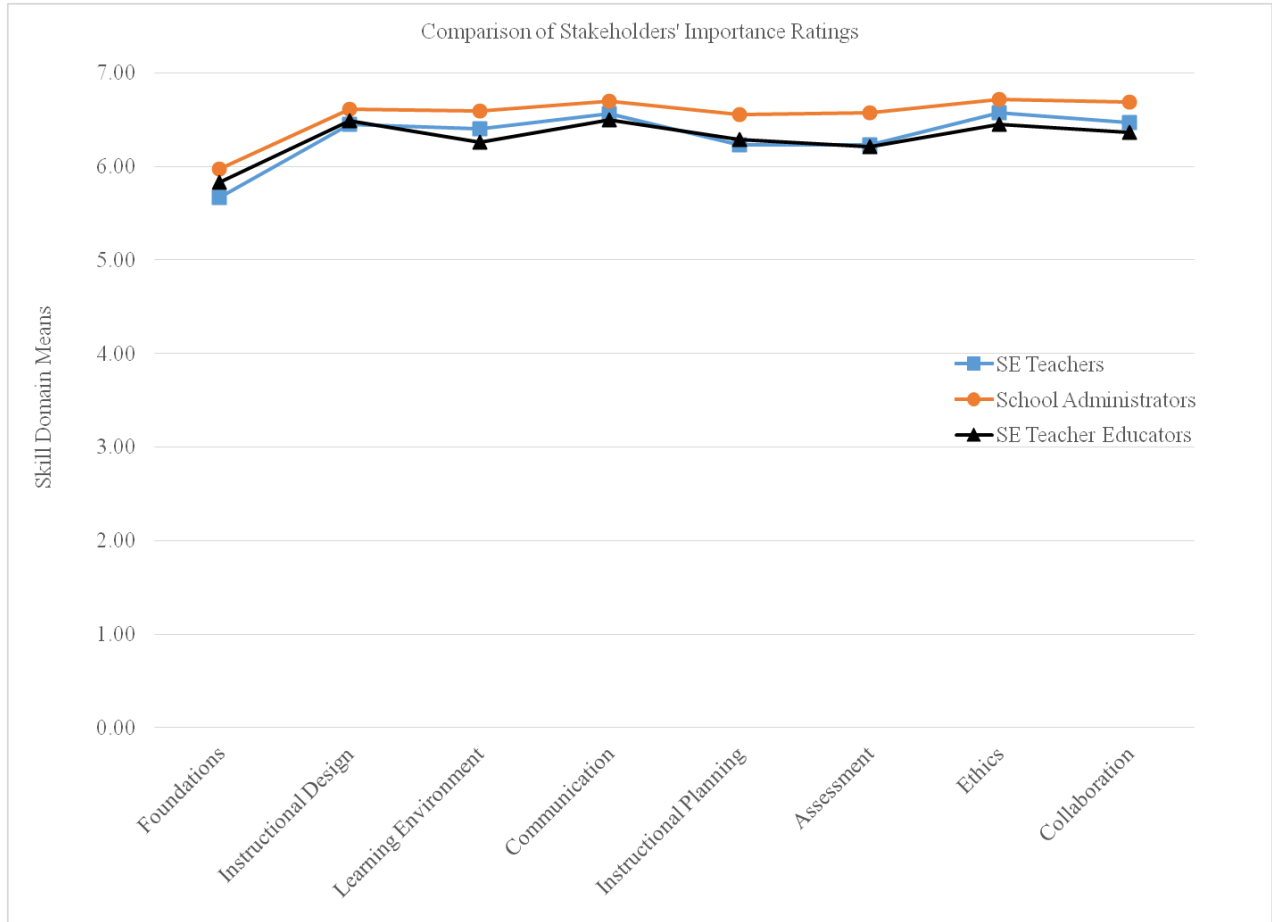


Figure 1. Stakeholder groups' mean importance ratings of special education professional skills.
 Note. SE = special education.